

By far the most valuable of these associations, according to CIA

# THE TIME OF THE ANGEL

## *The U-2, Cuba, and the CIA* STATINTL

by Don Moser



In the still of the October night, the slender, birdlike plane lifted into the sky from its base in California, climbed sharply on a column of flame, and headed east through the darkness. Pilot Richard Heyser, in the cramped, tiny cockpit, had good reason to be apprehensive, but he had little time to worry. He was totally occupied with the intricacies of navigation and with the exacting task of keeping his sleek aircraft aloft; for this plane was so specialized, so refined, that in the rarefied atmosphere that was its element it hung in the sky only tentatively, as if suspended from a wisp of spider's silk. As the plane climbed above fifty thousand feet it entered a critical altitude level called the "chimney." Once in the chimney, if the pilot flew a shade too slow, the plane would go into a stall and a spin from which it would never recover. If he flew a shade too fast, the fragile craft would come apart in mid-air.

For several hours the aircraft arrowed across the continent, gradually climbing higher and higher into the chimney. Periodically the pilot adjusted his airspeed, for as the plane climbed, the razor's edge between stall and disintegration grew ever finer, sharper. Dawn came, then sunrise. Now the Gulf of Mexico shimmered below.

The island came into view, tropical green rimmed by bright sand beaches. The pilot flew south of the island to a predetermined point in space, then turned back north. Pursuit might come at any time now, quick death slanting upward like an arrow.

There was a switch on a panel at his right hand. He had already thrown it from "off" to "stand by." Now as the plane passed high over the island's shore the pilot looked into his drift sight, a periscopelike device that peered through the belly of the plane. Then his hand moved once again to the switch on the panel...

During a period of thirteen days in October, 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union stood at the brink of war. In a confrontation over Russia's placing nuclear-tipped strategic missiles in Cuba, American aircraft, naval vessels, and assault troops went on alert and prepared for battle, while in Cuba Soviet technicians rushed to complete the installation of missiles that could reach almost any point in the United States. During the two-week crisis, President Kennedy estimated that the chance of armed conflict was *Approved For Release 2001/08/01 : CIA-RDP91-00901R000500010001-1* that potentially catastrophic war did not occur. Kennedy took a

threatening stance and Khrushchev ultimately dismantled and returned

As the missile crisis unfolded with certainty, beyond any doubt, the U.S. was indeed being installed on the shores. Kennedy was contemplating imposing a blockade—in

contemplate the even graver risk of launching an air strike against Cuba, an act that might well have brought Soviet retaliation. How could Kennedy have been so sure?

The answer lies in a secret airplane flight and in the technology that made it possible—a technology of spying developed under the aegis of the Central Intelligence Agency. This technology wrapped American spies in a new cloak, ending the Mata Hari era and ushering in an age of optics and electronics. The technology also gave the U.S. an enormous intelligence-gathering advantage over the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War. At times, as in the missile crisis, this intelligence allowed the U.S. to anticipate threatening moves by Russia. Equally important, the intelligence also dispelled groundless fears about Russian military superiority. Given the touchy temperament of the times, had the U.S. not possessed such intelligence, events might have taken an even more frightening turn.

The development of sophisticated intelligence-gathering tools began in the early 1950's, a time when the climate for such development was very favorable. For one thing, the President of the United States was a former general of the Army who had a professional soldier's familiarity with photographic intelligence. During World War II, aerial reconnaissance had been carried out by ordinary bombers and fighters stripped down and equipped with cameras instead of guns. These unarmed planes were highly vulnerable and extremely unpopular with their pilots, whose motto could be paraphrased as: "Get your pictures and get your tail out of there." The recon planes had to fly at low altitudes in turbulent air; since the cameras had no gyrostabilizing mechanisms to cushion them against shock, the quality of the photographs was generally poor, and even the quantity of information was limited by the film, which had a thick, space-consuming coating. In the postwar analysis, it was revealed that some 80 per cent of all useful military intelligence